

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Readers speak

When an article about *Connections*, *Misfits*, and related subjects appeared in the March 26 [Austin \(Texas\)](#)

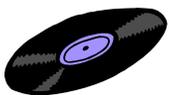
[American-Statesman](#), I sent it to everyone on my *Connections* e-mail list. Many of them are reporting reactions to me that the article has stirred up for them about the church and about justice issues.



Many replies are coming also from people who read the article but weren't previously aware of *Connections*. Their reactions are like so many others I've gotten during my years of writing *Connections*. They say, "I thought I was the only one who felt this way." "I was afraid there was something wrong with me." "I'm so glad to know that I'm not alone!"

Views and experiences that need hearing

At the risk of making longtime *Connections* readers feel like they're hearing a broken record, I want to share some of these latest responses with you, because I think it's important to be reminded that the views and experiences they report are widespread. It's even more important for all of us to be reminded that we need to speak more openly and persistently to promote needed change.



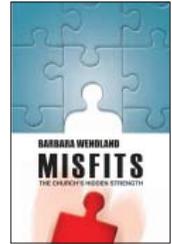
Like other comments I've gotten from readers in the past, responses to the *American-Statesman* article have several themes in common.



■ **Readers are turned off by churches that allow only one point of view on issues of justice and belief to be heard.** "I was editor of the church newsletter for a year," writes one woman, "but my

A note to pastors, misfits, and fits

Pastors, my new book *Misfits* would be ideal for use by groups in your church. It's written in easy-to-read conversational style. It includes suggested questions to stimulate individual thinking or group discussion. It will nudge your members to look at important but often ignored questions such as "What do I really believe, and why?" and "What is the church's purpose?" It will help them and you to see how your church could start benefiting from the strengths of Christians whom you're now turning off. *Misfits* will also let you know about other helpful books. One reader has told me, "The bibliography alone is worth the price."



Lay churchgoers and former churchgoers, if you feel like a misfit

in relation to the church because you have doubts or questions about some of what you hear there, or because you don't hear today's most important issues being addressed, read *Misfits* and take heart. It will reassure you that you're not alone in this feeling and that it doesn't mean there's something wrong with you. When you read my story and quotes from other authors and *Connections* readers, in *Misfits*, you'll find yourself saying "Yes!" And if you want to find people who share your views and concerns, you'll discover some ways of doing that.

If instead you're satisfied with your church and sure all your present beliefs are true—if you're a "fit"—*Misfits* will help you see why others feel differently and why that doesn't necessarily mean those others are wrong.



Here's how to get *Misfits* —

- ✓ Order online from www.amazon.com (or merely "look inside the book" there)
- ✓ Order with a credit card by phoning the publisher, St. Johann Press, at 201-387-1529
- ✓ Get a signed copy from me by sending \$24 (which includes shipping) to me at the address above.

speaking up ended my position. Our leadership doesn't want to hear or see anything that doesn't fit their world view." A Virginia pastor wisely points out that "any church with room only for 'fits' might want to undertake a serious Bible study on the New Testament!"



■ **They want justice issues to be addressed openly and often within the church.**

They want the church to present current information and provide opportunities for members to hear, examine, and discuss a variety of views on issues such as

health care, immigration, and war. But many congregations follow the opposite policy. They actively try to silence views that differ from those of the majority of their members or from national or denominational policies.



One of the many responders dismayed by this silencing is a lay United Methodist in Maryland. He wrote, "I wish my church could help us talk about the issues that separate us—torture, war, immigration—while still being able to worship together and respect each other. Our society so needs that."

■ **They're appalled by church people who insist on treating homosexuality as sin but ignore the sins Jesus warned about.**

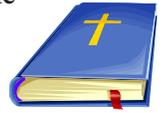
The pastor of a large metropolitan United Methodist Church in Texas says, "The people in their 40s in my congregation keep getting even more conservative, especially about homosexuality. So many mothers of teenage or young-adult sons, above all, are *consumed* by the fear that their sons will become homosexual. Yet these women are uninformed about this subject—about what the Bible says and also about what medicine and science have found—and they're not willing to become informed. It's totally irrational."

Writes a lay Episcopalian from California, "I am struck constantly that the biggest hurdle many parents have in accepting the sexual orientation of their non-heterosexual children is their church. This greatly troubles me. So does the church's silence about other social issues such as the inequities between the wealthiest



and the rest of us and the government's apparent approval of this."

And a 41-year-old stay-at-home Texas mom says, "It's amazing to me how the extreme right uses homosexuality to generate support, when the Bible mentions it maybe three times and Jesus himself never addresses it. The Old Testament is full of passages talking about taking care of the widows, orphans, and aliens. It is funny how we don't act on that though it is repeatedly mentioned!"



Here's how a lay United Methodist describes her congregation's increasing failure to reach out to the less fortunate in the community: "We are moving faster and faster away from the teachings of Jesus and toward a version that reminds me more of the times of Oliver Cromwell and Charles Dickens."

■ **They see that the fear of admitting uncertainty and facing pain leads many churchgoers to want the church to be merely a refuge into which they can escape.**

"Their scriptural superiority and triumphalism," writes a church alumna about an ultra-conservative church in which she suffered in silence for many years, "was a masquerade concealing an immense unhealed wound in their inner worlds. Instead of enduring the

pain of dealing with it, they clung to a no-questions-asked brand of fundamentalism that served as a tidy band-aid. It was an escape from that messy place of ambiguity, ambivalence, and contradiction otherwise known as mystery." Another reader observes that "many folks require a punishing God to take care of people they don't like."

■ **They know that what they were told about God in childhood is not believable, but that's all they find churches presenting.**

"I simply can no longer believe in the kind of God I learned about as a child," an Austin man writes. "But that's still the only kind of God I hear about on the rare occasions when, still seeking, I once again drag myself onto a near-the-door back pew somewhere."

Says a longtime United Methodist from Tulsa who has just retired, "The church has been my extended family and my circle of friends, but it offers



me no intellectual satisfaction. I happen to take John Wesley’s admonition to unite ‘knowledge and vital piety’ seriously. If I am going to find another source of what I need, now is perhaps a good time to do it. But it will be difficult here.”

“I have been taking some of my books and laying them out for borrowing,” writes a Kansas woman. “But usually the only attention my books got was to be poked with a finger like one would poke at a coiled snake with a stick.”



A retired pastor tells me, “I’m finding it harder each year to relate to my local UM church. Last night I volunteered to run the dishwasher, and Sundays I run the PA system, to help keep me some distance from the more literalistic-leaning people. We have a liberally minded pastor, but she has been burned by those from the theological and political right, so she now doesn’t want to upset the apple cart.”

■ Because of these feelings and experiences, many no longer participate in a congregation despite having spent decades in one earlier in life.

This is true even of some who are seminary professors or retired clergy or their spouses. Here’s how a vice-president of a church-related college puts it: “I have no involvement in a local church and mostly can’t stand the rare services I attend. But like you, I have a great sense of responsibility to try to reach out and offer folks who are in the pews or have left



the pews another way to understand and express their faith. I’m afraid the church in its present form is in the latter stages of hospice care.”

The turned-off members I hear from especially avoid worship services. Some of the lay people ac-

tively participate in study or outreach ministries, but not worship. Some of the professionals teach church-school classes often but don’t attend worship. Part of these Christians’ unwillingness to attend worship services is that so much of what is said and sung there isn’t believable to them. What they hear seems to contradict today’s best thinking and findings from other fields.



A UMC pastor’s wife who has stopped attending worship writes, “We expect people to subscribe to things that make no sense intellectually. It’s almost like I have to put my brain on a shelf and not think, throughout the service. It was an intellectually exhausting experience.”

■ They feel alone because their friends don’t understand, but they feel a welcome sense of relief and find that their faith has grown stronger.

One of the “church alumnae” who just discovered *Connections* says, “I have been wondering if anyone else besides me was having these issues that I’ve been having in my spiritual life for the past five years. I have left my church of over forty years for so many of the reasons that you express.



None of my friends understand at all where I’m coming from. I’m the lone ‘not going to church’ person.” However, she continues, “I’m no longer burdened down with all the trappings of being a church member. I feel a freedom and think I have a deeper spiritual walk with the Lord than ever before.”

Some of these lonely Christians stay in touch with others by e-mail or other web-based methods, as I do with what one responder called my “cyber-parish” and another my “online soul mates.” But we wish for soul mates to share with in person.

This issue, many back issues, a list of books I’ve written about, and more *Connections* information are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. Please include your name, city, and state or country. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, address, and \$5 for the coming year’s issues. For paper copies of any of the 18 years’ back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



I’m a lay United Methodist and neither a church employee nor a clergyman’s wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in more than a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

An unherdable group?

I keep hoping that more Christians with these concerns will start speaking out and joining others to push for the changes they see are needed in the church. But few seem willing to do that.

I've heard someone say that trying to get progressive people to work together is like trying to herd cats, and maybe that's right. Part of the nature of cats, and also of being liberal or progressive, is apparently not to be herdable. We each want to stay free to "do our own thing" and fol-



low our own discernment about what to do and how to do it.

But needed projects often can be accomplished only by a committed, organized group. We cannot simply abandon the church to the "regressives," who in their desire to enforce orthodox belief tend to organize and work politically to preserve the status quo. Think how much more progressive Christians might achieve if instead of staying passive, quiet, and alone, we could work together.



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Connections

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Connections readers speak

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"God bless the grass that grows through the crack; they roll the concrete over it to try to keep it back. The concrete gets tired of what it has to do; it breaks and it buckles and the grass grows through. And God bless the grass."

—from a Malvina Reynolds song, sent by a Texas United Methodist

I find these words a sadly accurate picture of many parts of today's church. Forward-looking members and perceptive outsiders keep pointing out cracks that are obvious to them. They see new information and insights coming through the cracks. Some propose replacing the cracked concrete walkway with one made of stones that could move instead of breaking when the soil shifts. The proposed new walkway might even deliberately provide for grass to grow in the spaces between the stones.

But fearful church members keep rolling more concrete over the intruding grass, trying to kill it and make the old walkway solid and smooth again.

I doubt that continuing to add concrete will work in the long run. The concrete will keep buckling and breaking, and bits of grass will keep coming through, because God is in the grass.

